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E.O. 12958: DECL: N/A

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SUBJECT: POACHING OF WILDLIFE IS RAMPANT IN ZIMBABWE

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1. (SBU) Summary: The poaching of wild game, by both commercial and subsistence hunters, has now reached crisis proportions in Zimbabwe. Game is being illegally taken from occupied private reserves and conservancies, national parks, and occupied farms that may or may not border protected game areas. The hunting and wild game industry claims that US \$40 million of game has been poached from private reserves since the land invasions started in 2000 (based on lost international hunting revenue). Snaring is endemic on occupied properties including commercial farms and game preserves, and national park boundaries are no longer respected by rural dwellers, be it for grazing, firewood collection or wildlife harvesting. Also associated with the poaching is widespread destruction of habitat, mainly deforestation, but also riparian damage caused by illegal gold panning and unmanaged poor farming practices. End Summary.

2. (SBU) Organized commercial poaching has gotten so bad in the Zambezi Valley that the Minister of Environment and Tourism recently announced the dispatch of a 200-man task force of soldiers, police and National Parks game scouts and guides to help control the stock loss. One contact at National Parks told Econoff that between 6 and 10 elephants were being killed monthly in the Kariba/Zambezi Valley park system. The situation was degenerating fast, he told us, and he and his colleagues had pointed out to their superiors the threat the rampant poaching poised to Zimbabwe's obligations under the CITES convention and also the Trans-Boundary Park and Conservation agreements recently signed by Zimbabwe. It was only these factors that got action, because in many cases the local powers-that-be share in the spoils of the organized hunting groups.

3. (SBU) The commercial poachers, who are armed and often utilize packs of dogs, target elephants and rhinos for their trophies, and all other plains game for their meat. The informal or subsistence poachers target anything that moves, and use wire snares to capture or disable their prey. A number of factors lie behind this increased activity, and principal among them are: the general decline in respect for law and order engendered by GOZ-sanctioned activity against opposition supporters in the pre- and post-election period; the widespread invasion and occupation of commercial farms and game reserves or conservancies (and the associated notion that anything on the properties is, so to speak, fair game); declining incomes; and growing food insecurity.

4. (SBU) The conservancy and hunting industry tells us that it has lost game worth more than US \$40 million since the farm and property invasions began in 2000. Some conservancies have lost 60 percent of their animals. The Parks Service is unable to quantify its losses, and up until recently it was denying that a problem even existed. Ruling party officials and provincial authorities have been witnessed on numerous occasions by commercial farmers and professional hunters leading weekend sweeps in public and private game parks, and on farms occupied by indigenous settlers. A weekly independent newspaper recently published details of a letter from a rural district council chairman to the local police officer-in-charge, seeking police transport, personnel and weapons to shoot a dozen large plains game animals on listed and

unlisted farms to feed ZANU-PF youth militia at four training camps located in the district. Similar behavior, but less well documented, occurs daily we are told.

15. (SBU) The head of the Save Conservancy, one of the world's largest private game sanctuaries (3,400 sq. km), recently stated that game loss and habitat destruction from settlers on designated portions of the reserve has "reached the point where we have to reconsider the future and viability of the whole project. Since August 2001 we have documented a total of 718 animals killed, including 6 wild dogs (of a total of 110), one black rhino, five elephant, 68 eland, 312 impala, 175 kudu, a leopard, 27 zebra and 52 warthogs and other smaller game." The undocumented loss could easily be much larger than this count, as large occupied areas of the conservancy have been no-go areas for more than 18 months. At another conservancy in the same region, an anti-poaching patrol came across a poachers' camp two weeks and "we caught five guys with 34 dead warthog, and a whole bunch of sable, antelope, bush pigs and dassies (the hyrax, a badger relative). They'd been there for 4 days and some of the meat was already going off, but they were still hunting. The warthogs alone had a trophy value of US \$100-200 each."

16. (SBU) Comment: Poaching has undeniably ramped up steeply in the last year, and the head of the Wildlife Association told Econoff that he believes that at least 20 percent of the national total herd has been taken in the last two years. The owners of two butcher shops that sell to the residents of high-density townships in the small towns of Bindura and Marondera related that over the last six months 20 to 40 percent of their meat sales have been game, which is clearly being hunted aggressively to supplement incomes and food needs. As is the case with commercial agriculture, no one in government seems particularly concerned that a national asset is being stolen and destroyed with great rapidity, contributing to Zimbabwe's slide to a distopia. End Comment.

SULLIVAN